

VZCZCXRO0301
RR RUEHGI RUEHMA
DE RUEHNJ #0509/01 1710644
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 200644Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5423
RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1413
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0507
RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 0947
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0853
RUEHGI/AMEMBASSY BANGUI 1393
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 1331
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0465
RUEHLC/AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE 1014
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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 2969
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 0721
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2196
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 1568

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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/C (MASHRAF), LONDON
AND PARIS FOR AFRICA-WATCHERS
INFO AF/PD (CANYANSO)

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE

C O R R E C T E D V E R S I O N

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CORRECTED VERSION; CHAD: TOWARD FREER RADIO AND
TELEVISION?

¶1. (U) Summary: There are some potentially significant changes underway in Chad's media environment, and, with the apparent end of the State of Emergency, censorship of the independent press has virtually ceased. First, Chad's government-controlled national radio and television are moving towards a more independent structure and away from direct government administration/oversight. Second, the High Council for Communications (HCC), Chad's media oversight body, has a new president and new council members. The new HCC president emphasized the role of the council as one of "oversight and control" of the independent media in a recent meeting, suggesting that he may not be a strong advocate for press freedoms. Third, with the expiration of the six-month State of Emergency declared in November 2006, the GOC has apparently stopped official censorship of independent media. One independent paper has even published in a recent issue all of the stories censored by the government over the last six months. End Summary.

Re-organization of Government Media

¶2. (U) Chad's government-controlled national radio network, RNT, and its television station, TVT, now fall under the direction of the National Office of Radio and Television (ONRT). This new office, headed by a Director General and his deputy, will have increased budgetary autonomy and more authority to hire its own staff. According to the new Director, Mr. Abba Ali Khaya, the ONRT will also exercise increased autonomy in selection of content for its radio and television broadcasts, the issues and stories to report on, etc. ONRT will also have total independence in deciding on affiliation(s) made with foreign media such as Radio France International, BBC, VOA, etc. The ONRT will gain greater independence from the government after a transition period of two years.

¶3. (SBU) The High Council for Communication, HCC, is Chad's media-oversight body. Although the HCC is an independent government body, its activities are directly controlled by the Minister of Communication and especially, according to several sources, by President Deby himself. According to our sources, the President has been directly involved in developing the various laws and decrees governing the Chadian press. Each law or decree appearing in the HCC's pamphlet "Laws on Communication in Chad" bears the President's signature. The publication of the pamphlet was co-sponsored by the European Union and the French Embassy.

¶4. (SBU) The newly-appointed members of the HCC include its new president, Mr. Bob Dedjebe Tirengaye. In a recent conversation with the Ambassador and PAO, he described his vision for the future of the HCC largely in terms of "control" and "sanctions" over the press when they commit infractions. Mr. Tirengaye plans to introduce a system of public hearings during which a journalist and his/her editor-in-chief will be called before the HCC to answer questions relative to a complainant filed. The HCC will then decide on the sanction, if any, to be taken against the journalist and/or the editor. The HCC president said that sanctions will include both fines and prison sentences for convicted journalists and editors. The HCC president said that he would soon organize a conference to put in place the new public hearing system, that will involve lawyers, media directors, ministry of justice and ministry of communication bureaucrats, and his HCC colleagues.

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Lull in Censorship?

¶5. (U) There has been no GOC censorship of the press since the State of Emergency, declared in November 2006, expired in late May. Despite the Prime Minister's comments that the State of Emergency is "de facto still in effect", the HCC and Ministry of Communication have not censored any newspaper or radio broadcast since May 26. In light of this, one French-language independent newspaper, N'Djamena Bi-Weekly, published all of its stories that had been censored since December 2006. Among the seven censored pieces are four editorials, each with a cartoon caricature, two reports on the effect of rebel activities on the GOC and the general population, and a December 3 speech by the Minister of Communication that the editors described as offering "serious threats against the independent press and political leaders."

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) It is hard to predict how the reorganization of the national radio and television will affect freedom of the press in Chad. In principle, the effort could make Chadian government media more competitive, since they will have more direct control of the content and the issues to develop, the equipment they need, and who to hire and fire. At the same time, the director of the ONRT and his staff will need to walk a delicate line between an independent editorial approach and the ever-present need to respect and respond to high-ranking government officials. The new HCC president is a trained journalist with much experience. He describes his new public hearing system as a way to keep journalists out of court. However, there is the real risk that the HCC will become an extra-judicial body that could hand out even tougher sanctions than the courts. The HCC president's discourse was heavily focused on the "control" and "punishment" functions of his council.

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